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## ORGANIZING THE LITERATURE PROGRAM

We need to develop programs that emphasize students' ability to develop and defend their interpretations of literary selection, rather than ones that focus only on knowledge about texts, authors, and terminology.

From Arthur Applebee, "The Background for Reform" in *Literature Instruction: A Focus on Student Response*, edited by Judith Langer, p. 12. Copyright © 1992 by the National Council of Teachers of English. Reprinted with permission.

Over the years, four principal ways of focusing literary study have predominated in the colleges and the schools:

1. The historical/chronological approach, featuring survey and period courses and a concern for literary history. (Often these surveys are done by individual nations, e.g. British literature.)
2. The author approach, with a concern for the collected works of a single writer and the relationships between the writer's biography and evolution as a writer.
3. The genre approach, which directs literary study through the examination of the principal forms of writing: poetry, essay, drama, fiction.
4. The masterpiece or great books approach, which unifies its study through the choice of widely accepted classics.

In any college or secondary school curriculum, one often finds a number of courses based on one of these four organizing features.

Although each of the above approaches may have value for the literary scholar, we suggest, as Applebee implies, that each takes the content of literary scholarship rather than human experience as its starting point. If one is teaching a genre unit such as poetry or drama, the common denominator of instruction is still the elements of a literary form, leading the teacher inevitably to such questions as, "What is the definition of poem?" "Why is Dr. Zhivago a 'better' film than *Gone with the Wind*?" "What is drama?" In a survey or period course, discussion emphasizes historical matters, concentrating on knowledge of times and writings. Each of the other approaches similarly initiates discussion in terms of critical content, and the students' personal involvement necessarily gets second billing.

To some extent, a fifth approach, humanities, has broken the tradition of criticism-centered courses by focusing on issues and ideas. Yet in practice, humanities courses are often simply grand survey courses in the historical/chronological mode, or they reduce truly interdisciplinary questions to a comparison of artistic genres.

We would like to suggest other ways to organize the teaching of literature.

- \* 1. Thematic approach. In this approach we start with a big theme (see Figure 7.3) or idea or question. For instance, to examine the concept of war, the teacher can begin by pairing *The Red Badge of Courage* by Stephen Crane with *Fallen Angels* by Walter Dean Myers so students can see war up close. Of course, in these novels there is a lot of conflict in the minds of the troops as to how they feel about their own participation, so that is talked about. In their literature logs students react and respond to what they are reading and discuss in small groups such things as how difficult or easy it is to follow what is happening in the books. You can bring in the writer's craft here as students work to figure out why Crane's novel seems so disorganized. Students usually come back to the content he is writing about and often can see that his novel is almost flashes of scenes. After doing further work on the novel, dealing with characters and figuring out what is happening, ask students to find lines of text that are so vivid they can be turned into found poems. This is a very effective way to teach imagery and the impact it can have on a reader.

The important thing to remember is that though this is a thematic unit, the purpose is not simply to identify the theme of war in the pieces examined, but to use the theme as an umbrella under which lots of texts and experiences can come together. Another part of the unit can be the dramatization of war poems. Bring in six to ten poems, have students divide into groups and work to visually and orally represent the meaning of the poems through the presentations. Other material that can be brought in includes videos dealing with war, such as *Born on the Fourth of July*, that will give students lots to think about. As end projects students can interview people associated with the Gulf War, the Vietnam War or the "peace action" in Korea. Students can write poems, stories, essays, or editorials on war. They can perform scripts they have written in response to the novels or participate in a talk show on the effect participation in a war has on people.

Thematic units are one way to think about and organize material in the language arts class that first focuses on issues and problems and second on literature. If a literature

Intolerance	Dealing with Differences
The Supernatural	Finding Ourselves
The Environment	Teen Life
Death	Survival
Coping with War	Teen Problems
Growing Up	Relationships
Conflict	Families
Our Heroes	Appearances
Learning About Life	Peer Pressure
Self-Destructive Behavior	Other Cultures

Figure 7.3 Themes in Reading

program begins with people and ideas rather than literary patterns, types, or histories, the teacher can effectively involve students' experiences in the reading process. By centering on ideas or topics rather than a form of literature, the teacher is free to bring in multiple resources in many forms and media and to provide direction for reading by allowing students to read for their own purposes.

Despite the dramatic shifts in interest in literary theory in the past thirty years, secondary and post secondary literature teachers in general continue to employ methods reflecting New Critical orientations. . . . Teachers continue to focus primarily on "close reading" of literary texts, on the assumption that such texts are invariably integrated or organic wholes. Or in the "formalist" approach found in traditional textbooks, students focus on how the specific aspects of texts—setting, character, plot, language, and theme—fit together to form a coherent whole. Such approaches are often assumed by their practitioners to be merely "common sense" (as John Mayher calls it) of literary study, and to be untouched by "theory."

From Richard Beach, *A Teacher's Introduction to Reader-Response Theories*, p. 2. Copyright © 1993 by the National Council of Teachers of English. Reprinted with permission.

2. *Novels approach.* Many teachers organize their teaching around novels. Although this approach has elements of the thematic approach in it, the organization begins with a novel, not a theme, and the teacher uses the novel as a starting point and a touchstone for the work the students will do. Teachers select novels they think students will be able to get involved in, and focus on using the novel as a way to make contact with issues important to teens, to push them to explore the issues, and to get them to think about the issues in terms of themselves. Additionally, of course, is the focus on extending literacy skills, to encourage students to write in different genres, in different voices, to ask them to do things they haven't done before—like selecting a scene to be scripted.

When teachers use novels as their organizing device they are usually concerned with finding ways to connect literature with life as they extend their students' literacy skills. Literary elements are used to help students talk about the novel, not as terms that the novel illustrates. The important thing is to allow students to explore the impact the novel makes on them, not use the novel to teach terminology.

Although a unit based around a novel can be found in Chapter 3, very briefly here are the steps most teachers take to involve their students. First they find a novel that they think will involve their students and one that has many issues and themes in it. For instance if the book to be read is *The Crazy Horse Electric Game* by Chris Crutcher (which deals with a protagonist who is an athlete until he sustains neurological damage from a boating accident), some of the issues are: losing a skill, conflicts with parents, running away, death, alcoholism, drugs, sports, the role of school in a teen's education, child abuse, boy/girl relationships, dealing with divorce. Next, beginning activities are planned to awaken student interest. A newspaper or magazine story could be brought in that describes an accident which caused physical disabilities such as the actor, Christopher Reeves', riding accident. Students can be asked how they think they would respond to an accident such as this and how they think Reeves learned to cope with his extensive disabilities.

Possibilities for group work can be sketched out next. Some options include: script a scene and act it out, explore poetry, find newspaper and magazine articles which speak to the setting, character, or themes in the novel, interview characters, write poetry in response to a character or event, share dialogue/response journal with another classmate. Writing options and projects are sketched out next. Students could be Willie on the Oprah Winfrey Show talking about "emotionally abandoned children." As Big Will, students could write an obituary for "dead" Willie, they could write two or three more chapters, or make a soundtrack for the book, selecting one song per chapter. They could pick a theme from the book and create a collage which illustrates this theme. They could write a series of letters from one character to another or create a map of a character's emotional progress. Research possibilities include physical disabilities, alternative schools, post-accident trauma, gangs, alcoholism, LSD. This thumbnail sketch shows some of the richness of this approach and a few of the many possibilities that could be used in organizing this way.

3. *Experiential or inquiry-based approach.* In this kind of teaching, a piece of text is usually used as a starting point for writing and discussion. Students work to raise questions that they want answered (see examples in Chapter 3). For instance, an inquiry-based unit might start with the reading of Gary Paulsen's *Hatchet* or *Woodson* and then move to other kinds of survival. Students write about things they have survived such as illness, the death of a loved one, a divorce, trying out for a team, or being rejected by friends. After papers and topics are shared students select a topic they want to know more about and that interests them.

At this point they move out to do interviews and other kinds of inquiry on the kind of survival they are researching. Some want to know how others have survived racism, abuse, alcoholic parents, traumas of high school, sickness, death of loved ones, injury etc. Students use both fiction and non-fiction to learn what others have experienced and to gain information. One of Diana's students focused on surviving the death of a close friend. She read a novel about a teen surviving the death of her best friend, interviewed young people who had experienced the death of a friend, found poems on the topic, read self-help books, and viewed videos. Her report to the class was moving and memorable. Literature in the inquiry-based unit is USED as teens further their knowledge and experience. They look at the literature analytically when they write and talk about whether an author's treatment of a topic, such as dealing with death, was realistic and reflected what is known about grieving. Literature and reading and writing and interviewing and researching are connected to life concerns. This approach helps students see literature and texts as something to read and talk about and as something connected to their lives.

4. *Modified author or chronological approach.* In the first years of teaching, having five different classes and three different preparations is overwhelming. Thoughts of best practice and creative curriculum design may take a back seat to simply surviving the experience. Since it is difficult to spend time looking for resources beyond the text at this point, start with the anthology. If at all possible with your several preparations, read ahead the first time you use the anthology so you can get a sense of what is coming. Think about the major ideas and issues that are dealt with through the literature and try to think of other resources you can bring in that in some way relate to the literature. But don't put the whole burden on yourself. Use poetry hunts by having students go

through the poetry collections from the library for usable poems. Also, the first time through an anthology, bring in collections of short stories. The library in your school probably has several. Or there might be old anthologies or old short story collections sitting dust-covered in the book room.

Use student input so you don't have to do all the work. Have them generate themes and ideas from the material you're reading. Bring in newspapers once every few weeks and ask students to go through a batch looking for editorials, feature stories, and news stories that might relate to what you are exploring. Actively involve the students in the process of creating units. Explain to them that you want to include more than material from the text, but that you will need their help. Set aside days in class to do this work and find ways to give students credit for all this reading and hunting. After a few years of using student help, you should have plenty of resources from which to draw so you can vary what you do.

We call this approach a modified author or chronological approach, because we encourage you, as you organize around the text, to change the typical ways of proceeding. First of all learn to use the text, but don't let the text use you. Just because something is in your text does not mean you have to use it. If after reading a poem, or essay, or short story in the text, you feel it will have little to say to students, feel free to skip it. Maybe at another time you will see worth in it. Also just because weighty introductions to sections in the text focus on such things as Romanticism, don't feel that this need be your approach to the selections that follow.

For instance, if teachers find themselves in the position of teaching the early parts of American literature, they can mute the impact of a strictly historical/chronological approach by finding ways to involve students and by showing them connections between the literature and their own lives.

Thus, before tackling Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* and Jonathan Edwards' *Resolutions*, which focus on how these authors wish to improve their lives, the teacher can raise questions about how important self-improvement is in today's society. Students can:

- Brainstorm all the ways in which our society is involved in self-improvement (aerobics, weight loss, finding inner peace, how to live without a man or woman).
- Read the selections with an eye to picking out the similarities and differences between what the authors think is important enough to change and what we think is important to change.
- Pick out five of Edwards' resolutions students strongly agree with and five they think are not important.
- Discuss what we can learn about the values and concerns of a people or a person by what they want to improve about themselves.
- Make up reading lists for Franklin and Edwards to help them achieve their goals (for example, Franklin might benefit from a book called *The New You—A Temperate Approach to Eating*).
- Think of the things they would like to change about themselves or their lives that could be accomplished by the end of the school year and then write a paper (possibly in the form of resolutions).

To cite another example from early American literature, students can look not only at issues but also at examples of a particular kind of writing and then begin activities based on that kind of writing. Thomas Paine's "The Crisis" and Patrick Henry's "Speech in the Virginia Convention" can be used as a springboard to persuasive writing or speechmaking and to a look at the ways we can be persuaded by the media today. Students can:

- Rewrite Patrick Henry's speech in modern English.
- Write a paper persuading the teacher of the need for more lenient or less work.
- Discuss why political speeches are in a literature book and why we no longer seem to treat speeches as literature.
- Discuss the media that our contemporary society used most to convince people on political matters.
- Explore the issues that concerned Henry and Paine. Are there issues today that can make Americans equally impassioned?
- Debate whether the kinds of persuasive devices that were used by the early Americans work today.
- Bring in ads they consider effective. Then, using their knowledge of the early Americans, explain how they might have responded to the same ad. For instance, would the appeal to be like everyone else work for them? Students might rewrite the ad in such a way that the product would appeal to those early Americans.

The new teacher should work to focus on making connections to students' lives and experiences and on discovering the relationships between the different pieces read.

5. *The Reading Workshop Approach*. Thanks to the work of Nancie Atwell and others, many literature programs are organized around the reading workshop. In the reading workshop, all students are usually reading novels of their choice. This is the major way this approach differs from Literature Circles in which groups of students read the same books. See Figure 7.2 for ways to get started with this approach. Students read, discuss, and advertise their books to other class members, creating excitement about books. Since most teachers don't feel they can conduct reading workshops at the expense of everything else, many set aside two days a week in which students read quietly, talk in groups about their books, and work on projects related to their books. Often classes such as this allow presentation time in which students share parts of their projects or do oral presentations which may include the scripting of an especially engrossing scene. As students get used to the small-group discussion aspects of this approach, they need less and less structure for their discussions, preferring instead to choose what they talk about each time.

## UNDERSTANDING WHY YOU TEACH LITERATURE

As you can see from the way we describe interactions with literature, we don't believe the purpose of reading literature is to locate and identify literary terms. We don't believe the purpose of reading literature is to show how this or that piece of literature

exhibits the characteristics of Romanticism or Classicism. We don't believe the purpose of reading literature is to learn history through the literature or to only use the literature as an example of what was going on in society at the time. We don't believe the purpose of reading literature is just to write papers with thesis statements. Nor do we believe the purpose of reading literature is to analyze the author's style and craft.

Literature was written to make an impact. Readers must talk about the literature, argue about it, look for points of agreement and disagreement with the author, look for ways it connects to their lives. We must keep this at the heart of what we do in the literature class and find ways to value and evaluate the meaning our students make through literature.

### Literary Theory and Purpose

People don't teach literature poorly on purpose. Many literature teachers who "tell" what a book means, have gotten praise for their approach from colleagues and often from students. However, we assert that such teachers could benefit their students if they examined their beliefs about the purpose of literature and brought to light the assumptions on which they are basing their teaching. According to the research of Arthur Applebee, teaching literature has not changed much in the last thirty-five years. Secondary and college English teachers, whether or not they are aware of it, are still mainly using a New Critical approach which operates on the belief that specific methods have to be followed to elicit the right meaning from a piece of literature.

Too often, teachers who use this approach communicate to students that literature is about finding the same meaning that some superior intelligence decided on—not about seeing what the piece means to the reader and how the reader can connect it to his or her life. Teachers who use this approach sometimes seem to forget that literature is written to have an impact on the reader and that mucking about to create meaning by examining this impact is more important than agreeing with a critics' interpretation. When teachers elevate the opinion of "others" they often show they lack confidence in making literary judgments themselves. They also forget that to develop an interpretation, a critic did a lot of mucking about first, and then made his or her "best guess" about the piece.

Often because of their dependence on this approach, teachers lose their ability to respond to the content of the literature, responding instead only to the craft and to how a piece was put together. In our view, discussions of craft should be used as another way into the literature, not as a fence to put up between the literature and the reader. Only to analyze and discuss the hows of a piece robs the reader of a literary experience and deprives the reader of an opportunity to respond to and discuss the content of a piece. Imagine asking students to read Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and then only talking about it in terms of the techniques the writer used, without ever talking about what the writer is writing about! Too often this kind of literature class only deals with how an effect was accomplished, not what the piece has to say. This seems to be a misuse of literature.

As teachers evaluate their own stances toward literature the three elements that come into play, according to Kathleen McCormick, are the place of the text, the place of the reader, and the place of the social/cultural context that shapes the transaction between the reader and the text. Teachers who teach from a New Critical stance place

authority within the text and the text becomes the most important of the three factors. Although there are many, many literary theories, we are only briefly touching on the two that seem to provide the broadest contrast.

The other major theory is the reader-response approach which places the authority in the reader. Reading is viewed as an interaction between the text and the reader. When this interaction occurs, meaning is made. Texts spring to life when their words enter a reader's mind. This view comes from the work of Louise Rosenblatt, who first articulated this way of reading in the 1930s. Most of our explanations of approaches to literature in this text, are grounded in Rosenblatt's work. But teachers who deal with literature often fear embracing this approach because they think it means they must accept every student response as valid. These teachers should be aware that asking students to go back into the text to explain the source of their response is a common practice in classrooms where reader-response is in operation.

"I argue that both texts and readers can be seen to possess *repertoires*, a subset of the larger culture's discourses, beliefs, values, and ways of understanding the individual and the world. I contend that readers can become critically literate, active readers only when they are able to analyze the ways in which their own and texts' repertoires are embedded within the larger culture. I therefore argue that pedagogies need to be developed that can engage students in three interconnected areas of study. First, students must become able to analyse how they themselves are culturally constructed as subjects-in-history—this is, how they are both constructed by (or 'subject to') larger cultural forces and how they are also capable of taking autonomous action within those forces. Second they must learn to analyze how texts are likewise culturally constructed. . . . Third, they can then use such cultural and historical analysis to develop and defend critical positions of their own."

From Kathleen McCormick, *The Culture of Reading and the Teaching of English* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1994), p. 9. Reprinted with permission.

McCormick encourages teachers to help students become aware of all the stances and perspectives they read from, to take the socio-cultural background into account. The point of considering the socio-cultural is to help students understand that every piece of literature is written from a point of view and is based on assumptions, that nothing written is simply "the way it is." When they react and respond to literature, different pieces of their background and belief systems come to the forefront and influence their take on a piece. When students respond to books, it is important that they know which role as a reader they are predominantly using when they read. If an African-American reads *Of Mice and Men*, he may react strongly to the treatment of Crooks, the black stable hand. This may be central to his response and the entire way he views the book would be shaded by it. Or when a female reads the book, she may respond very strongly to the fact that Curley's wife isn't given a name and is judged harshly for trying to be friendly with the farm hands. So our socio-cultural background influences the way we respond to books. In one reading our spiritual stance may lead us to view a character a certain way, in another book our strong views on organized labor may be the lens through which we mainly see the plot. The importance for students in identifying and being able to articulate their stances is to help



them see how they are situated in terms of the text so they can better understand their own responses. The importance for the teacher is in recognizing that each point of view from which we read will cause readers to see texts differently, but no less validly. Whether we grew up in a rural, suburban, or urban area, whether we are male or female, whether we are Latino, African-American, Asian, or Caucasian, whether we had a strong religious upbringing, whether we came from a poor or wealthy background, whether we were taught to value sports or not, whether we were an only child or one of many—all these things can affect the way we view stories and the characters in them. Our goal is to help students recognize all the factors that go into their response so they may better know what they are reacting to and can better explain and question their own responses.

### INTEGRATION OF THE LANGUAGE ARTS THROUGH LITERATURE

It is no doubt clear by now that the literature programs described here are, in essence, language arts programs—they involve at least as much composing, speaking, and listening as they do reading and literary study. This integration seems to us highly desirable: teachers should encourage a natural flow from one form of language to another. By offering writing options as part of a literature unit, the teacher makes the *producing* of language a comfortable outcome of *consuming it*. Similarly, when reading is focused toward an actual task—learning something or persuading someone—it too becomes natural and purposeful and leads easily to related language arts activities.

In fact, it is perhaps inaccurate to call these English units at all, since they involve experiences outside the dimensions of the traditional English course; they are genuinely interdisciplinary. In the history of education, English has often been an umbrella subject, with the teacher trying to hold the umbrella straight while teaching basic reading, the history of Western civilization, spelling, the business letter, the necessary skills for success in college, and the differences between Elizabethan and Petrarchan sonnets. We suggest that integrated literature units, particularly with a thematic emphasis, provide a way to pull together diverse demands, while actually enlivening study and providing students with useful training for other fields. There seems to be no reason the English teacher should not incorporate the materials of science, history, math, business and industry, politics, psychology, sociology, vocational education, art, music, journalism, and theater, since they can be used to provide a genuinely humane, broadly practical literature and reading program.

#### ◆ EXPLORATIONS

To run a good literature course, one must be bibliographically agile, knowing sources. Teachers need not always know the fine details of what is in the literature, but the knowledge must be sufficient to allow them to make recommendations with confidence. Here are three projects a teacher can undertake to develop bibliographic agility:

1. Spend time browsing in a paperback book store looking at books that might be useful with students. Don't limit your thinking to traditional literature. Check out the sociology section, the history paperbacks, the joke books, and the science section. Examine the handicrafts department and the sports books. Check cookbooks. Practice scanning for content so you can form quick, reliable judgments about a book's applicability.
  2. Do the same with the magazine section of a bookstore. There is a phenomenal number of magazines on which you can draw regularly. Check such titles as *Gem Collector* or *Czechoslovakia Today* for possible use.
  3. Learn about pamphlet and brochure sources. Enormous amounts of such material are printed each year in this country. For starters, familiarize yourself with the publications available from the Superintendent of Documents in Washington, D.C., and from your state's printing office. Then check travel agencies, public service institutions, universities, county agriculture agents, and the pamphlet files at your local library.
- Pick a topic that you think would interest students of the age you like to teach, and create a list of related books of increasing sophistication and difficulty. It might be interesting to start with picture books.
  - Learn how to give a book talk. Focus on spending only a minute or two on each book, giving your listeners only a few sentences that will raise their interest and curiosity.
  - Try letting a class (or a few students) embark on a totally free reading program, with you serving only as a guide or coach. Stay with it long enough to see patterns of growth and development emerging. Do students grow as readers when left on their own? Do they enjoy the program?
  - Design a record-keeping system for an individualized reading program.
  - Get together with two or three other teachers and build a resource unit, just to find out how it's done and how much or how little work it involves. Flip a coin to see who gets to test it first.
  - Study a conventional literature anthology in terms of its adaptability to thematic teaching. For example, if you find a British literature anthology that is organized chronologically, consider ways in which its literary selections could be restructured along thematic lines.
  - Create introductory activities for a novel you know well. The next time you use the novel, see which activities work best at piquing student interest.
  - Sketch out plans for a two- or three-week unit on a specific novel. Include several activities for whole-class novels mentioned in the chapter and create several of your own.

- Look through an anthology and find two or three selections you could do a mini-unit on. Generate as many teaching ideas as you can on these selections.
- Read more about literary theories and share your ideas on what each theory believes about the place of readers, texts, and socio-cultural context. What implications does this theory have for the classroom? Share your ideas with other group members and look at what you can take from each of the theories to help students find ways into the literature.
- Observe a teacher over a short period of time as he or she deals with literature. Work to dig out the assumptions on which that teacher is basing his or her approaches and plans. Which literary theory does the teacher seem to embrace?

### RELATED READINGS

Many books in this burgeoning area of literature instruction can push your thinking and help you sort out your assumptions about literature teaching. They include Robert Scholes' *Textual Power: Literary Theory and the Teaching of English*, Kathleen McCormick's *The Culture of Reading and the Teaching of English*, Gordon Pradl's *Literature and Democracy, Knowledge in the Making: Challenging the Text in the Classroom* edited by Bill Corcoran, Mike Hayhoe, and Gordon M. Pradl, and *Literature Instruction: A Focus on Student Repsonse* edited by Judith A. Langer. To read more extensively on the reader-response theory we suggest *The Experience of Reading: Louise Rosenblatt and Reader-Response Theory* edited by John Clifford and *A Teacher's Introduction to Reader-Response Theories* by Richard Beach.

*The Language of Interpretation: Patterns of Discourse in Discussions of Literature* by James D. Marshall, Peter Smagorinsky and Michael W. Smith, and *Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in the Student-Centered Classroom* by Harvey Daniels focus on discussion and talking about literature. *Literature IS . . . : Collected Essays of G. Robert Carlsen* edited by Anne Sherrill and Terry Ley looks at literature and programs in terms of teens and their interests. *Learning the Landscape: Inquiry-Based Activities for Comprehending and Composing* and *Recasting The Text: Inquiry-Based Activities for Comprehending and Composing* by Fran Claggett, Louann Reid and Ruth Vinz, which could be used as student texts, focus on ways students can relate and respond to literature. *Transactions with Literature: a Fifty-Year Perspective* edited by Edmund J. Farrell and James R. Squire not only summarizes research on the teaching of literature but also looks at books and classroom practices in terms of what is done in literature instruction. Other books that focus on literature instruction are *Passages to Literature: Essays on Teaching in Australia, Canada, England, The United States, and Wales* edited by Joseph Milner and Lucy Milner, *Exploring Texts: The Role of Discussion and Writing in the Teaching and Learning of Literature* by George E. Newell and Russell K. Durst, and *Literature and Life-Making Connections in the Classroom* edited by Patricia Phelan.